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ABSTRACT

Continuous changes and unpredictability create a complex environment for managers of academic affairs. What is the dean's role in the community college environment and how can he or she fulfill his or her obligations? This digest focuses on four main areas: the dean's role in the community college, the daily decisions and conflicts facing managers of academic affairs, management concerns, and professional development. Trying to manage diverse populations with a variety of needs can be daunting and pose problems for academic deans. Clarifying the role of the managers of academic affairs and defining their responsibilities are crucial to understanding the nature of the job. Because deans must make difficult decisions, dealing appropriately with conflict that results from those decisions is a determinant of how effectively the dean manages the academic affairs at an institution. Hence, information and communication are key elements for deans in carrying out the day-to-day activities at the community college. Effective leadership and a broad base of knowledge are tools necessary to help the manager of academic affairs lead the institution into the future. Contains 11 references. (VWC)

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Facing Challenges: Identifying the Role of the Community College Dean

By Kristen L. Walker

The variety of responsibilities facing deans at community colleges can be difficult to manage. Accordingly, deans must have the required knowledge, skills, and abilities in order to carry out their tasks. Continuous changes and unpredictability create a complex environment for these managers of academic affairs. What is the dean's role in the community college environment and how can they fulfill their obligations? This Digest focuses on four main areas: the dean's role in community college, the daily decisions and conflicts facing managers of academic affairs, management concerns, and professional development.

Dean – A Definable Role?

The multifaceted role of the *dean* in an institution of higher education leads to ambiguity and poses obstacles in defining the dean's purpose. Although there has been a lack of "scholarly attention" paid to the role of the dean in the community college, Robillard (2000) provides insight into the responsibilities facing those managing academic affairs. Summarizing the duties of the community college dean from Vaughan's 1990 study, Robillard describes how the nature of these duties varies due to the wide scope of activities, resource constraints, and the differing responsibilities within each institution. In order to deal with such ambiguity, managers of academic affairs should have experience in dealing with administrative and supervisory activities when they come into the role of the dean.

How does the dean deal with the changing community college environment? Erwin (2000) describes two basic models of change: bureaucratic and participatory. Although the bureaucratic model is often viewed as slow and detrimental to change, there are merits to any change model. Both models emphasize that the community college student should come first, thus emphasizing learning as an essential aspect of the dean's leadership role. Challenges to these goals are the processes and the participants in the process. Often, the dean's response to any challenge is restricted by distinct guidelines and processes outlined by the institution. Cross-departmental and divisional challenges also influence any changes the dean envisions. With student learning as the objective, instructional technology influences these processes, both positively and negatively. These change models describe the dean as playing a unique leadership role within the institution: they must handle complexities, attempt to initiate change, and remain focused on the student.

The faculty and the president of the community college are primary participants in the processes that deans must follow. Andrews (2000) describes the conflicting needs of both the faculty and the president that confront the academic deans. It is essential for the dean to develop a working relationship with the faculty and the president of the institution in order to reduce conflict and meet the variety of challenges. In order to maintain good working relationships, communication is essential and deans must build a trusting environment with the president and faculty (Kuss, 2000). By doing so, deans can be successful managers of change and innovation.

Decisions and Conflict

George Findlen (2000) describes the dean's job, which includes making difficult decisions, as a "lonely activity." Reactions to the dean's decisions often come quickly and from a variety of constituents (i.e. faculty, staff, and students). While providing examples of particularly difficult decisions, Findlen outlines five aspects of a problem: the problem itself, the issues, the players, the alternative courses of action, and the motives and goals. In all, the difficult decisions that deans must make are often complicated any of these problems.

As Rose Findlen (2000) states, "Conflict is the job" (p. 41). The manner in which deans view conflict can actually affect the way they handle difficult situations. In most cases, although students and faculty can be major sources of conflict for the dean, this conflict should be viewed as healthy in order to deal with it effectively. Findlen recommends three basic approaches to dealing with conflict: traditional, behavioral, and principled. The traditional approach is used to eliminate conflict, the behavioral approach is used to accept and deal with the conflict, and the principled approach is implemented to initiate the conflict to ensue communication.

Managing Resources

Community colleges are faced with the task of providing quality education and programs for students. In most cases this needs to be done with considerable constraints on resources. The dean is responsible for many aspects of the budget, such as budget development, management, brokering resources, reviewing the budget, and perhaps even fundraising.

With all of these necessary responsibilities, how are deans able to effectively carry out the management of academic resources? McBride (2000) describes a general lack of knowledge and competence in financial matters by deans at community colleges. By providing a glossary of accounting terms, the author highlights some of the key areas that deans should know and in which they should become proficient.

In addition to financial resources, the dean is responsible for managing the data and the resulting information about the institution and its constituents. This information can be useful in assisting the dean in making difficult decisions, thus improving the decision-making process. Although most community colleges have a great deal of data, the ability to transform that data into useful information requires competent staff and appropriate know-how (Johnstone and Kristovich, 2000). Storage and retrieval are key elements in the effective management of the institutional data and will assist the dean with the often difficult task of managing academic affairs.

Professional Development

Leadership is a necessary and critical skill for those managing academic affairs. The dean as the leader actually, "create[s] the stage for future operations while managing day-to-day activities" (Bragg, 2000, p. 75). In one sense the community college is in a constant state of transition and renewal, and must strive to be both consistent and flexible within the particular environment. Changes in faculty, staff, students, and the organization itself are common to the community college environment. Bragg lists six core knowledge areas for deans:

(1) mission, philosophy, and history
(2) learner-centered orientation
(3) instructional leadership
(4) information and educational technologies
(5) accountability and assessment
(6) administrative preparation

A dean must deal with a highly diverse group of students, faculty, and staff at the community college. This environment necessitates the use of professional development to help the manager of academic affairs to attend to these various groups and needs. George Findlen outlines a practical source list for the dean of a community college by providing references and resources for key responsibilities deans may face. These responsibilities include: conducting faculty evaluation, overseeing the discipline and termination of students and faculty, and enforcing student privacy. In addition to these responsibilities, Findlen highlights a few sensitive and pressing issues confronting deans, such as dealing with sexual harassment, enforcing American with Disabilities Act, and having a general knowledge in the legal arena.

Conclusion

Trying to manage diverse populations with a variety of needs can be daunting and pose problems for academic deans. Yet, clarifying the role of the managers of academic affairs and defining their responsibilities are crucial to understanding the nature of the job. Because deans must make difficult decisions, dealing appropriately with conflict that results from those decisions is a determinant of how effectively the dean manages the academic affairs at an institution. Hence, information and communication are key elements for deans in carrying out the day-to-day activities at the community college. Effective leadership and a broad base of knowledge are tools necessary to help the manager of academic affairs lead the institution into the future.

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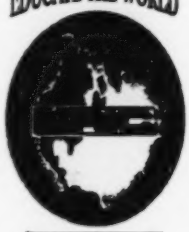

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